MAY BARTLETT'S STEPMOTHER

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BY NORA PERRY

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"Oh, May, we have heard all about it, and we are so sorry."

MAY BARTLETT'S STEPMOTHER

BY

NORA PERRY

AUTHOR OF "ANOTHER FLOCK OF GIRLS," "A FLOCK OF GIRLS AND BOYS," "A ROSEBUD GARDEN OF GIRLS," "HOPE BENHAM," ETC.

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MAY BARTLETT'S STEPMOTHER

I.

"A STEPMOTHER? How horrid!"

"Horrid! I should think so."

"What is it that is horrid, girls?" asked another girl, who, in passing, had caught only the last sentence.

"Why, about May Bartlett, you know."

"No, I don't know; what is it?"

"She has a stepmother."

"No!"

"Yes, yes," cried the first two speakers,—the Macy sisters, Joanna and Elsie.

"But when, *when* did it happen, this stepmother business?" exclaimed the girl to whom they were telling the news. "I saw May in vacation, and she did n't lisp a word of it."

"But you have n't seen her since you came back?"

"Well, no; as this is my first *hour* back, almost. But tell me when the stepmother was brought on the scene?"

"A week ago, — that is, Mr. Bartlett was married to her then; but he has n't brought her home yet. They are travelling."

"Who told you?"

"Mrs. Marks, the housekeeper. I went round yesterday to see if May was at home."

"And you saw May?"

"No; she was n't expected until the late afternoon train."

"And she did n't know anything about the stepmother until a week ago?"

"Two weeks ago; a week before the marriage."

"Well, I call that downright cruel. If it was *my* father!" And Cathy Bond stamped a little foot on the floor with an emphasis that spoke unutterable things. Two or three more girls who had just entered the schoolroom came up at this demonstration with a "What 's the matter, Cathy?" And the matter was told over again with a new chorus of "ohs" and "ahs" and "poor Mays." There was only one disagreeing voice, — a soft little voice that broke into the "ohs" and "ahs," saying, "Stepmothers are very nice sometimes. I have a cousin — "

"Nice!" cried Cathy, and then directly went off in a flow of wild talk, — a string of stories all going to show that stepmothers were anything but nice.

At the first hint of a pause, the little soft voice began again, —

"I have a cousin —" but Cathy had mounted her hobby-horse of prejudice, and flashed out, —

"Oh, bother your cousin, Susy Morris; I know two girls *intimately*, who have stepmothers, and they can't do anything, not *anything*, they want to do!"

"Who, the stepmothers?" asked Joanna, slyly.

"No; the girls, of course," answered Cathy, rather crossly. "And they used to have everything, and do just *exactly* as they pleased. Oh, you need n't talk to *me* about stepmothers; they interfere between the fathers and children, and are a meddling, selfish set."

As Cathy paused to take breath, Susy promptly struck in with, "I have a cousin —" but a shout of laughter interrupted, and Joanna Macy repeated, with merry mockery, "I have a cousin;" then, turning and clutching Susy in a swift embrace, she cried out, —

"Oh, you dear, queer, funny little thing, with

your running chorus, 'I have a cousin.' But tell us about her. Come, Susy has the floor; Susy 's going to tell us about the cousin. If Cathy interrupts, we 'll put her out. Now, Susy, begin, 'I have a cousin.' "

Susy blushed a little, but without any sign of annoyance unhesitatingly took up the words, "I have a cousin," and went on with her story.

It was a sweet little story of kindness and comfort and happiness brought into a lonely home to a lonely child, by a sweet, kind, good woman.

But it did not make the impression it ought to have made upon the girl listeners, for Cathy's stormy talk of injustice and cruelty had blown into their minds a tangle of wild thoughts, just as a storm in Nature blows all the wild weeds and sticks and stones into a tangle of dust and dirt that confuses and blinds one.

Susy, who appeared so slow and placid, had a keen perception of some things. Her mind was like a little clear lake through which she seemed to look and see the truth. Through this clear little lake she now looked and saw that not one of these girls, not even Joanna, whom she specially loved, received her story with much belief. It

was not that they thought she was wilfully telling what was not true, but they were saying to themselves, —

"Oh, that is only Susy's easy, pleasant way of taking people. Susy does n't understand." But Susy *did* understand more than they imagined; and it was out of this understanding that she started up suddenly with a quicker motion than was common with her, and in a quicker tone cried out, —

"My father says that prejudice makes people deaf and blind." She paused a second, gave a short sigh, and dropping into her ordinary manner, and in her little soft, drawling voice she added, "If 't would only make 'em dumb, 't would be all right."

The girls were used to Susy's wise speeches, spoken in that soft voice of hers, and with a curious twist to the letter *r*, which she could n't pronounce without giving to it a half sound of *w;* and they generally laughed, not at the speeches alone, but at the quaint combination of the speeches and Susy together. As a matter of habit they laughed now; but Joanna had caught the spirit of the speech, and she followed the laugh by saying, —

"Susy is right; prejudice does make us deaf

and blind, and it is a pity we could n't be dumb too instead of talking such stuff! What do *we* know really about stepmothers?"

"We know what everybody has always said," struck in Cathy.

"Everybody is always saying everything."

"But there are the Longley girls, — my two friends I told you of."

"And there is Susy's cousin; that 's the other side. I 'll set that against the Longlegs, or whatever is their name."

"Well, I sha'n't. I shall never believe in stepmothers; I know — "

A quick "hush" from Joanna arrested Cathy's sentence. She looked up. They all looked up; and there was May Bartlett, not three feet away! How long had she been there? How much had she heard? Perhaps she had just come in and had heard nothing. But she was standing at her desk, and her books were unstrapped and set in order. She must have heard something in this time. Joanna could have stamped with vexation at herself, and at the others. Oh, why, why, had she — had they all — been so careless? But something must be done. Somebody must go forward and speak as if nothing had happened. Joanna started on

this errand, but Cathy was before her, and in the next moment, flinging her arms about May, was saying in an impressive, pitying accent, —

"Oh, May, we have heard all about it; and we are *so* sorry."

May Bartlett was a proud girl, who generally held her private affairs in a good deal of reserve, but this sudden demonstration at this time was too much for her self-control, and she burst into tears. Joanna could have beaten Cathy. Why could n't she have greeted May as if nothing had happened? But that was just like Cathy, to make a scene.

The girls came forward awkwardly after this, and there was a general uncomfortable time, until Susy suddenly burst out in her odd little way, —

"Oh, May 's got a straight bang!"

The girls giggled; Joanna caught Susy in a little hug; and the tragic atmosphere was relieved.

II.

A WEEK later, May Bartlett was standing at the parlor window waiting for her father and his new wife, her stepmother.

"Why don't you go to the depot to meet them?" asked Mrs. Marks.

May had colored up angrily at this question, and a hot rush of tears had blinded her eyes as she turned away without answering. But it was a natural question for Mrs. Marks to ask, for May had been in the habit of meeting her father at the pretty little suburban station almost every afternoon on his return from the city. "But meet *them* at the depot! How could Mrs. Marks speak of such a thing!" the girl thought indignantly.

Tick, tack, tick, tack, went the little cathedral clock on the mantel. In fifteen minutes the train would be in, and in five, ten minutes more the carriage would be at the door, and then — and then — the tears that May had tried to keep under control suddenly overflowed, as she imagined the change that was coming. Eight weeks ago, when she had gone away with her

Aunt Mary to the seashore to spend her vacation, May had planned what she would do in the autumn. In the first place, she would have a party, — a garden-party, for September was a lovely month at Hillside, and her father had promised her a garden-party ever since they had taken possession of their new house there, three years ago. She would invite all the girls of her set at the Hillside Seminary, and as many of her friends in town — and by "town" she meant Boston, which was only six miles away — as had returned from their summer jaunts. Then she would persuade her father to buy her a village wagon. She could drive very well, as he himself had said, and she could bring him from the station quite as well in a village wagon as in the shabby old phaeton which she was permitted to use, when Patrick was too busy to go with the dog-cart. Yes, a party and a dear little duck of a wagon like Marion Grant's, and then — and then — but at this point of her recollection her tears flowed afresh, for of course all these pretty plans must go, with the coming of the new mother — no, the stepmother; she would never, never call her *mother!* Her mother! she looked up at the portrait that hung above the little clock, — the portrait of a fair

sweet-faced woman with pleasant eyes that seemed to follow you about with a laugh in them. She died five years ago, when May was nine years old ; but May could almost fancy she heard her mother saying, as those laughing eyes met her daughter's, —

" What 's the matter with the little daughter now ? "

A sob caught in the daughter's throat here, and she cried aloud, " Oh, Mamma, Mamma, it 's no small thing that 's the matter now, but a very, very great thing ! It 's somebody coming to take your place, — your place and mine, Mamma." But if May had a half fancy that the eyes would look different, would change their merry expression at this, she was mistaken. As the yellow afternoon sun sent a bright dancing ray across the canvas, the eyes seemed to dance with it in the happiest possible way, and tick, tack, tick, tack, the little clock sent its yellow pendulum back and forth in the sunshine. From the portrait, May glanced at the clock-face. Why, why, why ! the fifteen minutes had passed, and so absorbed had she been in her thoughts that she had not heard the locomotive whistle. How very odd ! She ran out of the room, and out of the hall upon the piazza. The train must have

arrived, and in five minutes more she would hear the carriage. From end to end she paced slowly up and down. How sweet the honeysuckle smelled, and the late lilies were all red and gold bloom. Leaning over the railing, she broke one from its stem and pinned it in her dress; as she did so, she could see the clock through the open window. Not only five, but ten minutes had gone. She stopped and listened. Was that the carriage? No. Five minutes more. The train could n't have arrived. What *was* the matter? Tick, tack, tick, tack, another five minutes went by, and Mrs. Marks came out on the piazza.

"My dear, I never knew this train to be late," she said anxiously. Then May's endurance gave way, and catching her hat from the hall-stand, she ran down the steps, calling back as she went, —

"I 'm going to the depot, Mrs. Marks, to see if anything has been heard. I can't wait here."

"That 's right, dearie; you'll feel better to go, but I would n't worry, — there 's been some delay somewhere, that 's all."

"Some delay somewhere!" May thought of the delay that had occurred on the Boston and Providence road the year before, when the Roslindale bridge had given way, and hundreds of

people had gone down with it. Her heart seemed to beat up into her throat, to stop her voice, and almost her breath. She could not frame the words to ask a question when she entered the depot, but she heard some one say, "There's been an accident." She lost the next sentence, and caught only the last words, "— but the track is clear now, and the train has started."

Walking to the farther end of the platform, away from all the people, poor May sat down upon a baggage-truck to watch and wait. As she sat there she imagined the worst that could have happened. Perhaps her father was badly hurt, perhaps he was killed, and she would never see him again; and at the very time when he had been suffering, perhaps dying, she had been having hard thoughts of him, had blamed him for what he had done and what he had not done, — for marrying again, and for not telling her of his plans until the last moment. She grew hot, then cold, as she thought of the words she had said to Cathy Bond,— of how she had joined her in calling him unkind, and even cruel. Oh, if only he came back alive, so that she could show him how she loved him! If only he came back, she would not do any of the disagreeable things she had declared to Cathy Bond that she

would do. She would — yes, she would — even kiss her stepmother when she met her. She had said to Cathy only yesterday, "I shall not kiss her, and I shall be very stiff and cold to both of them." To *both* of them! Perhaps, perhaps —

In another moment May would have lost all control of herself and burst out crying, if the sound of a long shrill whistle had not roused her to the immediate present. As she heard it, she jumped to her feet and ran up the platform.

Yes, there was the train rounding the curve. In a minute she would know — what? She crowded her way through the throng of people to the front. Swiftly, then slackening in speed, the cars roll in and come to a full stop. There are faces at the windows, there are voices saying, "I am so glad to see you;" but not the face, not the voice she is longing for. She turns sick, cold, and dizzy, and staggers backward with an attempt to get away out of this eager throng that seems so happy. Then it is that somebody cries, —

"Why, here she is, now!"

She lifts her head, and there he is, — her handsome, young-looking father, sound and well, and smiling down upon her.

"Oh Papa, Papa! I thought you were killed —

the train was so late, and they said — they said — "

"My dear child! There, there, don't — *don't cry.* It's all right, you see. Here, Margaret, here's this little girl has been frightened half out of her wits at the delay — thought I was killed."

May made a great effort to be calm, but the reaction was so swift, it was hard work; and her pale face and tremulous lips were expressive of her nervousness as she looked up to meet her stepmother's glance. It was not a smiling glance like her father's, but May found it easier to meet for that reason. She knew her father always dreaded what he called "a scene," and had always discouraged any outbreaks either of tears or excited laughter; and with this knowledge she was perfectly well aware that her twitching lips and pallid face were annoying him at that moment. But this serious glance that met her, and the quiet remark, "I don't wonder that you were frightened at such a delay; *I* should have been very much frightened in your place," gave May a little time to recover herself; and then the quiet voice went on, asking no questions, but speaking of the causes of the delay, that did not, it seemed, involve much

danger, being merely an accident of obstruction, by the breaking down of a freight-car, of which warning was duly given from station to station.

"Oh, I thought it was something dreadful," May broke forth at this. "I heard some one say something about an accident, and I was too frightened to ask a question myself."

"And so worked yourself up into a fever with your imagination, as usual, my dear," her father responded, half laughing.

"She did the most natural thing in the world for a girl. I think I should have done the same thing," the quiet voice here said, with an easy tone of bright decision.

"Oh, you! I dare say. I've a pair of you, I see."

May looked at her father in surprise. He looked back at her with a funny little grimace.

"Yes, May, she's just such another goose as you are in some things."

May caught the smile upon her stepmother's face. Her stepmother! In the excitement she had for the moment forgotten *the stepmother.* She regarded her now for the first time with observing eyes. What did she see?

A tall slender young woman, with brunette coloring, and an air of ease and elegance about

her. May glanced across at her father. How happy he seemed, and how young he appeared! But he must be a great deal older than this new wife, — this "Margaret." He had gray hairs, and there was no gray in that dark coil and fluff under the small stylish bonnet. May took in all these details and said to herself, "Why did she marry him, I wonder?" Then a mischievous little spirit whispered that her father was a rich man, and she remembered what Cathy Bond had said about girls marrying for money. Alas for May's good resolutions, as she sat waiting for the train a few minutes before! If her father only came back! And here he was, full of life and strength, and she had forgotten already. If he only came back, she would show him how she loved him, she would even — kiss her stepmother when she met her! But as the girl thought of this last duty which she had meant to perform, it suddenly came over her that she had really not been called upon to perform it, — that nobody, in fact, neither her father nor her stepmother, had seemed to expect it. Of course everything was to be accounted for by the excitement of the occasion, but, nevertheless, a feeling of chagrin sent a flush to May's cheek at the recollection,

and then a swift sharp question stung her, "Was this the way she was to be forgotten by them?"

The tears sprang to her eyes again at this thought, and she had hard work to repress them, but a glance at her father, and the sure knowledge that she had of his dislike of unnecessary scenes, once more controlled her.

III.

"A GARDEN-PARTY? Why, yes, so I did promise you a garden-party some time. I remember; but it seems to me — it 's rather late in the year, is n't it?"

"Oh, no; not if I set it for next week. Hillside is lovely in September."

"Yes, but next week is the fourth week in September, — pretty late in the month to count on the weather. Margaret," and Mr. Bartlett's voice rose a little louder in tone as he called to his wife, who was coming down one of the garden walks to the piazza where he and May were sitting.

"Yes," responded Margaret, looking up from the flowers she carried.

"Don't you think the fourth week in September is rather late for a garden-party?"

"Decidedly late. Why, I hope you are not thinking of giving a garden-party, are you?"

"I? Oh, no; it was May's idea. There, you see, — you 'll have to wait until next year, my dear," turning to May.

Margaret lifted her head quickly, and saw a rebellious expression on her stepdaughter's face. It was a still, cold expression, that she had seen several times before in the three days she had been at Hillside. Coming forward more rapidly, she said easily and pleasantly, —

"It is very nice of you to think of a garden-party for me; but it *is* rather late, you know."

Mr. Bartlett had taken up his newspaper, and paid no heed to these words. May sat silent, her chin dropped against her breast, all kinds of mutinous little thoughts in her mind, first and foremost of which was, "She thinks everything is to be for *her!*"

Mrs. Bartlett meanwhile stood regarding the down-bent face with a look of great perplexity, and with a slight flush on her cheek. The flush deepened, as May suddenly jumped from her chair, and catching up her school satchel, started off down the walk with a "Good-by, Papa."

Her father glanced over his paper with a look of surprise. It was not May's habit to go away like this, without a good-by kiss. He was about to call her back, when he saw her join one of her school friends just outside the gate. In a few moments the matter slipped from his mind, in the absorbing interest of the political news he was reading.

It was Cathy Bond whom May had joined. Cathy was full of a lively interest in the new stepmother. She had found May rather reserved in what she had said within the last three days, and was greatly desirous of discovering the "reason why," of seeing for herself what sort of a person the stepmother was, and "how things were going;" but her little plan of calling for May was foiled by May's joining her outside the gate. In a moment, however, she saw, with those sharp eyes of hers, that something was very much amiss, and in a sympathetic tone asked, —

"What is it, Maisie; what is the matter?"

"Matter!" With a catch in her breath May repeated the brief conversation about the garden-party. The reserve of the last few days had vanished. Her good resolutions had blown to the winds. But it was only to Cathy that she

spoke directly. Whether Cathy would have had the strength to have been silent if May had asked her, it is impossible to tell. But May did not ask her, — perhaps in her resentment she did n't care, perhaps she did n't think ; at any rate Cathy did not keep silent, and by the afternoon recess all the girls knew the story of the garden-party as they had heard it from Cathy Bond.

Even Joanna Macy was stirred to indignation by this story.

" She *must* be conceited to think the party could only be for her. What had May to do with getting up a garden-party for her stepmother ? "

Susy Morris, who heard the indignant tone of Joanna's voice, wanted to know what it meant.

" Oh, it means," cried Joanna, " that Cathy was n't far wrong about the stepmother ; " and then Joanna repeated the story as she had heard it from Cathy, that May had asked her father that morning if she might have the garden-party he had promised her, and that her stepmother had interfered and said that, though she was much obliged to May for thinking of giving a garden-party for her, that it was de-

cidedly too late for it, and that she hoped it would not be thought of any more! "The idea," concluded Joanna, "of her taking it for granted that the party must be for her, — that May, a girl of fourteen, would think of getting up any kind of a party for her! I never heard anything so conceited. Well?" as Susy's small face began to wrinkle up with a puzzled frown, "say it out, Susy, whatever it is!"

"My cousin —"

Joanna shouted with laughter.

"Oh, Susy, that cousin of yours!"

But Susy went on: "My cousin was n't but fifteen, and she asked her father to make a sailing-party for *her* stepmother. Perhaps May's stepmother thought that May was just asking for the party in the same way, as a kind of welcome, you know. She might have misunderstood, or she might not have heard the whole, — don't you see?"

"No, I don't see. They were *all* on the piazza, talking; and May had distinctly asked her father if she might give to the school-girls the garden-party that he had promised that she might. Now, Miss Susy, what have you to say?"

"Nothing, only it does seem queer, if all this

was said *right out before the stepmother*, that she should have thought the party was for her, and should have thanked May. When she did that, why did n't May tell her how it was; or why did n't Mr. Bartlett?"

"Oh, Susy, you will make a first-class lawyer if you live to grow up," was Joanna's laughing reply to this. But though Joanna laughed, Susy's words set her to thinking that perhaps there *was* a mistake somewhere, and suddenly she thought of something her mother had said to her once when she had repeated an unkind story to her: "My dear, a story twice told is two stories; and three times told, the truth is pretty well lost sight of."

But when Joanna tried to take this ground with the girls, she could get no hearing, for Cathy Bond was a power at the Hillside school, with her quick sympathies, and her quick glib way of expressing them. To May this quick glib way had always been attractive; it was still more so now, when she found it ranged so warmly on her side. Yet if she had heard Cathy's repetition of her account of the garden-party conversation, I think she would have been a little startled, but she did not hear it, and so matters went on from bad to worse;

that is, the story grew and grew, and one girl and another took up what they called poor May's cause, and looked, if they did not speak, their pity, until May became such a centre of interest that she could not but be affected by it, could not but feel that she had reason to be very unhappy. Yet in spite of this feeling, there was n't so much outward indication of it as one might have expected.

Joanna remarked upon this one day to Cathy, declaring that, for her part, she thought that May seemed to look very cheerful under the circumstances.

"Cheerful!" exclaimed Cathy, tragically. "Why, she 's just wretched, but she 's keeping up; you know they are having no end of giddy goings-on up there."

"Up where?"

"Why, at the Bartletts'. Lots of people are calling; and it seems that Mrs. Bartlett has any quantity of friends and relatives in Boston, and they are driving out to see her and having five o'clock tea with her, and all that sort of thing."

"And May is in it all?"

"Why, to be sure. It 's a trial to her, of course; and it 's as much as she can do to keep up."

"A *trial* to her! Why is it a *trial* to her?" asked Joanna, imitating Cathy's grown-up words and ways.

Cathy flamed up. "You don't seem to have any feeling, Joanna. Don't you suppose she thinks of her own mother while these things are going on?"

This was too much for Joanna's keen common-sense, and she laughed outright.

"Things going on! Calling, and drinking tea! Oh, Cathy!"

"Well, but — but — it is n't just ordinary calling; it 's like — like parties," answered Cathy, flushing and stammering.

"And has n't Mr. Bartlett had whist-parties and dinner-parties many a time?"

"They were gentlemen's parties."

"Well, did n't May's Aunt Mary — her mother's own sister — have parties when she was staying there? and," triumphantly, "has n't May herself had a birthday-party every year since her mother died?"

"Yes; but that 's different. This is a stranger who comes to take her mother's place."

"She 's a stranger to May; but Mr. Bartlett has married this stranger just as he married May's mother."

"Yes, and I think it was horrid for him to do so."

"Oh, Cathy, lots of people marry again, — the nicest and best of people."

"Well, I think it is perfectly dreadful, when there are children, to give them a strange woman in the place of their mother. It is just as selfish as it can be."

"But, Cathy, there are good stepmothers as well as bad ones. Why, stepmothers are just like other people."

"Yes, *before* they are stepmothers; but when they step into own mothers' places, they — they — "

As Cathy hesitated, Joanna laughingly broke in with, "They become wicked wolves, who are all ready to worry and devour their poor victims!" Cathy could not help joining a little in Joanna's laugh; but she said, almost in the next breath, —

"Oh, you can make fun, Joanna, as much as you like, but you 'll never make *me* believe in stepmothers!"

Just when Cathy was saying this, just when Joanna was wrinkling up her forehead and wanting to say impatiently, "Oh, you little pig of prejudice!" — around the corner where they

stood talking, there suddenly appeared a big open carriage, full of gayly dressed people.

"There she is!" whispered Cathy, pointing with a nod of her head to a lady who was smilingly speaking to the gentleman sitting next to her.

Joanna craned her neck forward eagerly. This was her first glimpse of the stepmother.

"Why, she 's a beauty!" she cried out to Cathy; "and she looks like a girl! But where 's May, I wonder?"

"Oh, yes; where 's May? You see she is n't there. I suppose she was n't wanted; there was n't room for her," answered Cathy, spitefully.

But presently round the corner they heard again a light roll of wheels on the smooth road, and there appeared another carriage. It was a little yellow wagon, — a village wagon, — and in it were May Bartlett and a young girl about her own age. May was driving. She looked more than cheerful; she looked as if she was enjoying herself very much, and she was so occupied that she failed to see her two school friends as she drove by.

Joanna laughed.

"That 's what you call 'keeping up,' I suppose, Cathy," she said slyly.

Cathy did n't answer.

"And she has got the village wagon, after all. You were perfectly sure she would n't get it, you know."

"Well, May told me that when she asked her father for it, he said he did n't believe he could afford it now, and her stepmother flushed up and looked at him so queerly, as if she did n't like it; and so, of course, May thought that was the end of it. But I suppose when he came to think it over, he was ashamed not to get it for her."

Joanna wrinkled up her forehead again, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

IV.

CATHY BOND was spending the first vacation of the autumn with her "dear May," as she had been in the habit of calling May since the intimacy that had sprung up between them.

The girls who lived at a distance from Hillside generally remained at the seminary through the shorter vacations. Cathy Bond's home was two days' journey from the school. The Macy sisters and Susy Morris also lived at a distance, and the four hitherto had spent their vacations

together at the seminary. Cathy's invitation had come about in this way: —

"I 'm glad I don't have to spend my vacations at the seminary, as some of the girls do," May had happened to say one day to her father. Mrs. Bartlett, who was present, had looked up and remarked quickly, —

"It must be very forlorn for them." And when May had answered with emphasis, "It *is* forlorn," Mrs. Bartlett had surprised her by saying, —

"Why don't you invite one of them to spend the week with you?"

"But — but," May stammered, "Papa does n't like it."

"Papa does n't like what?" then inquired Mr. Bartlett, waking up from his absent-mindedness. May explained, and related how she had begged for this privilege of hospitality before, only to be told that it could n't be. Her father laughed at the recital, and then astonished her by this speech: —

"Oh, well, that was last year! I could n't have two giddy young things turned loose in the house then; I should have been totally neglected, if not trampled upon. Now, you see, I 've somebody to be company for me, while you neglect me."

"Oh, Papa! do you mean that now —"

"Yes; now, if you like," nodding and smiling at her.

"And I hope," said Mrs. Bartlett, smiling also, "that you will invite that pretty, bright-faced Cathy Bond."

Cathy Bond! The color in May's cheeks and her embarrassed look showed Mrs. Bartlett that something was amiss, and she immediately remarked, —

"Of course it makes no difference to me, my dear, which of your friends you invite; but I remembered this one particularly, and I thought her your favorite, from seeing her more with you than the others."

"Oh, yes; yes, she is," was May's rather confused reply.

And this is the way it came about that Cathy spent the vacation with her "dear May."

"After she has talked as she has, I should n't think she 'd feel much like going there to visit," Joanna exclaimed indignantly to her sister Elsie. And at last something of this kind was said to Cathy herself, who retorted that she was going to visit *May* at May's invitation, and not the stepmother. Perhaps it was this last sharp word that sharpened Cathy's

temper, and sent her on her visit with her prejudices more alive than ever.

"That pretty, bright-faced girl," Mrs. Bartlett had said; and Cathy was all that, — pretty and bright-faced; but when she sat at table that first night of her visit, Mrs. Bartlett felt a vague sense of disappointment in her. She had seen her only a moment or two at different times when she had called upon May, and then her prettiness and brightness had impressed Mrs. Bartlett very favorably. But as she sat at table, there was a sort of forward smartness, a too self-possessed, grown-up-ish air in what she said and did, to suit fastidious, well-bred people.

"Oh, dear," thought Mrs. Bartlett, "what a pity! — and such a nice-looking girl;" and then, "perhaps this is one reason why May has such a forbidding way with her."

While these thoughts were passing through Mrs. Bartlett's mind, Cathy with her sharpened temper was pluming herself upon her manners, and upon taking a stand against the stepmother. "I shall be polite," she had said to herself; "but I shall not be sweet and cordial, and I shall let them see that May has a real independent friend."

Mr. Bartlett, who at first had begun to try

and make "the little girl," as he called her, feel comfortable by saying pleasant, kind things to her, soon gave up his endeavor; and as he did so, he looked at her with one of his queer satirical expressions. May caught the look and grew hot, then cold. She knew perfectly what it meant, — that he was half displeased and half amused. What she did not know, was that he was thinking just then, "What in the world led Margaret to suggest that piece of trumpery as a visitor for May?" But as he ceased his endeavors to make "the little girl comfortable," another idea flashed into his mind. It would be a saving grace to let May see, as he could make her see, what a second-rate simpleton — for so he judged then — this friend was. The idea was too tempting not to be acted upon; and suddenly addressing her with a deference he might have shown to an older person, he drew the girl on to display — as she supposed — her knowledge and brilliancy. Instead, however, of these qualities, Cathy only displayed her foolishness and forwardness, behaving in fact in a very second-rate manner indeed. "Oh," thought poor May, "I would n't have believed that Cathy could go on like this! She can be so sensible. And Papa — Papa is too bad."

She looked appealingly at him, but he did not notice her. She then tried to stop Cathy by asking her a question about school matters. But Cathy would not be stopped. Still she rattled on, perking up her little chin, and laughing, until May began to feel very much ashamed, and to wish that something would happen, or somebody would come to the rescue. And somebody did come to the rescue; and this somebody was — the stepmother.

Mrs. Bartlett had been observant of everything, — of her husband's "mischief," as she termed it, of Cathy's silliness, and of May's annoyance.

"What possesses Edward," she thought, "to draw out that child's absurdities like this?" And then she echoed May's thought, "It is too bad of him." But like May, she didn't understand his motive. Yet if she had understood, I think she would have done the same thing. And this is what she did. As she saw her husband, with that look of mischief on his face, about to address Miss Cathy again, she turned to him with a sudden question relating to an important matter in which he was interested. His attention once caught, she held it, though there was an amused sparkle in his eyes that

"He looked at her with one of his queer and satirical expressions."

showed he was perfectly well aware of his wife's purpose. But the purpose was served, and May drew a sigh of relief.

But Cathy was not so well pleased to be thus robbed of what she considered such flattering attention, and responded rather absently to May's low-voiced attempts to talk with her; and after they had left the table, when May tried to draw her into her own special sanctum, — a charming room full of books and pictures and games, — Cathy said decidedly, —

"Oh, let's go into the parlor; I think it's so pleasant where there's an open fire."

But if she fancied she was again to receive the attention that had so flattered her, she was mistaken. Mr. Bartlett became absorbingly interested in a book, from which he now and then read passages to his wife. He took not the slightest notice of "the children," as he would have called them. Disappointed by this neglect, Cathy looked about her for some amusement; and as she saw the open piano in the farther corner of the large room, she whispered to May that they might try one of their duets.

"Oh, no, no! not now; we'll try to-morrow," poor May whispered back. But Cathy could not or would not understand, and saying care-

lessly, "Well, let me look at the music," led the way to the instrument. Once there, she did not content herself with looking; she must just try whether she could remember this or that she had taken for a lesson. "This or that" turned out to be a few bars of various compositions, not of the highest order, and played without particular skill. May stole a glance down the room at her father. Mr. Bartlett was fond of music, and had some knowledge of it, and a cultivated taste. May saw him twist his mouth into a comical smile, and shake his head ruefully as he looked at Cathy.

"Come, let us play 'Halma;' I have a new board," she whispered to Cathy.

But Cathy just then struck into a gay waltz, and banged away with all her might. As she played the last bars, Mrs. Bartlett approached.

"That was one of the Strauss waltzes, was n't it?" she asked Cathy politely; and then she began to speak of the great Peace Jubilee in Boston, when Johann Strauss had come all the way from Austria to play, and to lead the great orchestra in the colosseum that was erected for the jubilee.

"I was about your age then," she said, looking at Cathy, "and I never had had such a per-

fectly lovely time as I had then." As she went on describing that fairy-like structure, with its glass roof, covering so many acres, and the bands from England and Germany and France and Austria and Ireland, that came over to America to play their own music in celebration of the peace of the world, May leaned forward, spell-bound by the description and all it brought before her; and even Cathy forgot herself for the time. After this, Mr. Bartlett called out,—

"Margaret, play something for us;" and Margaret played some beautiful selections from Schumann and Beethoven, and then, at the last, she sang a good-night song by Robert Franz, and with the concluding words, "Good-night, good-night," she rose, smiling, from her seat; and as at that instant the little clock on the mantel struck half-past nine, May knew that it was time to go to bed, and rose also, expecting Cathy to follow her example; but Cathy hung back, and began to speak.

"Do you know any waltzes that you could play for us to dance, Mrs. Bartlett?" she asked. Before Mrs. Bartlett could reply, Mr. Bartlett had come forward, and was saying, "Good-night, children;" and in the next moment he was

asking his wife to play a Hungarian march for him.

May was only too glad to get away. Once upstairs by themselves, Cathy would be herself again, she reasoned. But there were several things rankling in Cathy's mind, not the least of which was that "Good-night, *children;*" and when May, with a little skip of relief, entered the chamber, and said cheerfully, —

"I don't feel a bit sleepy; do you, Cathy?" Cathy answered sharply, —

"I? No; I could have waltzed for half an hour."

The color flew to May's face. "But, Cathy, it is half-past nine, half an hour later than I usually go to bed, and you told me that nine was the seminary hour."

"Well, this is n't the seminary. I did n't expect to visit a school," sarcastically.

May had to remember that Cathy was her guest, and that she must be polite to her, so she said, —

"I'm so sorry, Cathy. But — she — will play for us to dance to-morrow, I dare say."

"'She' — oh, that 's what you call her? I 've wondered what it was! What do you call her when you speak to her?"

"I — I — don't say anything. I wait until she is looking at me. I — "

Cathy went off into a giggle.

"Oh, it's too funny. I must tell the girls when I get back that you only speak of her as 'she,' and wait until she looks at you before — "

"Oh, don't, Cathy!"

"Don't what?"

"Don't make fun — like that — to the girls."

"Well, I *should* just like to know what has come over you, May Bartlett; but I know well enough. *She* has got the upper hand of you in your own home, that 's clear."

The color in May's face deepened.

"How can you talk so foolishly, Cathy?"

"I 'm not talking foolishly. I saw it at the very first, when we were at the tea-table. What did she do when your father was so nice and pleasant to me but stop him and make him talk to her! And then she would n't let him come near us in the parlor, but came herself after a while, and told us stories about that old jubilee. I've heard my mother tell about it a hundred times."

"Oh, Cathy! you don't know — "

May stopped. She could n't tell Cathy that she had been saved twice: once from making herself ridiculous, and again from being an

annoyance, by — yes — by the stepmother. And it was the stepmother who had encouraged her visit, who had spoken of her as pretty and bright-faced, when Cathy had been so bitter against her, and, worst of all, at the very time when she had been really doing her a kindness — but what was it Cathy was saying?

"I *do* know one thing, May, that you are another girl here at home from what you are at school. You don't seem to remember what you've told me about the garden-party, and the wagon, and everything. You to tell *me* not to talk to the girls!"

May began to feel very angry, and luckily very small too; the latter feeling prevented the outburst of the former. How could she admonish Cathy? There was a silence for a few minutes, while Cathy, with an injured look, made her preparations for bed. By and by May said, with an effort, —

"She wanted you to come."

"*She* wanted me;" a little rasping laugh, and then, "What do you mean by that?"

May explained by relating the conversation where Mrs. Bartlett had spoken of her so pleasantly. The angry lines relaxed a little in Cathy's face, and presently she said easily, —

"Well, it was never *my* affair, you know. *I* never knew anything about her, except what you told me, and I'm sure I hope she will turn out nice for your sake."

May struggled with her temper. She felt put in the wrong on every side. But even if she yielded to the wild impulse within her, what could she say? If Cathy had encouraged *her* to talk against her stepmother, she had likewise encouraged Cathy!

There was nothing to be said then, and nothing to be done, except to listen to Cathy with what patience she might; but Cathy herself presently turned from the subject to something else, and a little later, all unkind thoughts were lost for the time in slumber.

V.

"PLAY for you to dance? Certainly I will. But, May, how would you like to invite the other girls who are spending their vacation at the seminary to join a little party here on Saturday evening?"

"But there are not enough to make a party."

Mrs. Bartlett smiled.

"But I said 'join a party.' I thought I would invite some of my friends in Boston with their young people, if you would like it, and then we might have enough for a dancing-party. *Would* you like it?"

May looked up. There was something in the wistful tone of this "*Would* you like it?" that made her ashamed of her ungracious hesitation; yet Cathy's sneering accusation of the night before, "You are another girl here at home from what you are at school," had been rankling in her mind. She must prove herself; she must show Cathy that she was the same, and so instead of responding at once as she felt, with delight at the project, she said after that hesitation, in a cold tone, —

"Yes, I should like it very well." And then Cathy, who was standing by, sprang forward and exclaimed:

"Oh, Mrs. Bartlett, I think it would be just lovely, and I'm sure *I* shall like it above all things!"

Again May felt herself put in the wrong and misunderstood, and again she had to struggle with her temper. This conversation had taken place on the morning after Cathy's arrival, which had been upon Friday, the beginning of

the vacation. The party proposed was for the next Saturday.

"The only thing that troubles me is that I have n't a light dress to wear, — I've only my garnet cashmere here at Hillside," Cathy remarked, when she and May were alone together.

"Oh, but we are so nearly of a size you can wear one of mine; I have two white wool dresses," May answered readily.

When the dresses were produced and tried on, Cathy found that the latest-made dress suited her best.

"But, Cathy, don't you think it is too long? It comes almost to the floor upon *you*. I am taller, you know."

"Oh, no, 't is n't a bit too long. I like it," Cathy replied hastily. And so the matter was dismissed, Cathy, after removing the dress, hanging it up in the closet with a pleased air. The week sped by very quickly, and for the most part smoothly. Cathy evidently enjoyed herself, though she found that Mr. Bartlett was no longer disposed to treat her as a grown-up young lady; indeed, that he took but scant notice of her. The long drives, however, in the little village wagon in the bright early days of winter

that were like autumn, the trips to Boston, to a matinée performance of "Little Lord Fauntleroy," and to visit one or two picture galleries, filled the short days to overflowing. On several occasions during this time, Cathy had said things that had made May exceedingly uncomfortable. Once, at the beginning of the preparations for the little party, she suddenly asked, "Don't you help, when anything of this kind is going on?"

"Help! how?" May inquired in a bewildered tone.

"Why, with the notes of invitation for one thing. I always do that part at home."

"No, I never thought of it. When Aunt Mary lived with us I was too young, and she left us only two years ago."

"Well, you do have an easy time, May, I must say," Cathy had responded to this. May did not care to ask Cathy for any more of her opinions on the subject; a sense of hurt pride was beginning to affect her, — to make her draw back within herself, and to feel that Cathy was going too far. Once she would have told Cathy this, would have told anybody who had spoken to her in such a fashion; but now the consciousness that she herself had opened

the way for Cathy to be so free with her, silenced her.

Yet in spite of some annoyances like this, the week ran rapidly toward its end, and Saturday morning came. Just after luncheon Mrs. Bartlett said to the girls, —

"Had n't you two girls better try on your dresses now, and see if everything is all right? They may need new ruching in the neck, or some little changes. I always try on a dress after it has n't been worn for a while, before the last minute, as we used to say at home."

May started up readily; Cathy was not so ready.

"But I've tried the one I'm to wear, Mrs. Bartlett," she said.

"Yes, I know, — all by yourselves; but don't you want to let me see if everything is right. If it is n't I can let Julie attend to it at once."

May was already upstairs, and Cathy slowly followed her.

As Mrs. Bartlett entered the chamber she saw her stepdaughter standing arrayed in a very pretty white gown, much too short in the skirt.

"There, now, my dear, here is something to be done. You have grown so tall, your skirt must be lengthened." She busied herself for

several moments in taking measurements, and then turned to Cathy.

"Why, my dear, you both have made a mistake. This is as much too long for you as the one May has on is too short for her;" and she went forward, smilingly, ready to help remedy this "mistake." But Cathy stepped back.

"No, there is no mistake, Mrs. Bartlett. I — my party-dress at home is as long as this. I like it."

"But — with your hair down in a braid, it hardly seems to suit you. The skirt is as long as mine, I think," Mrs. Bartlett remarked quietly.

"Oh, well, I shall put my hair up to-night. I often do at home," quickly responded Cathy. "Besides, the other dress would be short for me too. I 'm nearly as tall as May."

As she spoke Cathy walked across the room to the mirror, and as she did so the difference in height allowed May to look easily over her head. Mrs. Bartlett caught May's eye at that moment, and laughed! This was very undignified, no doubt, but Mrs. Bartlett was only an older girl herself, and the whole situation had suddenly become irresistibly ludicrous to her. May, too, in that moment, felt her indignation

at Cathy change to merriment; and as Cathy wheeled about with a look of questioning, she surprised an exchange of glances that both mortified and offended her.

Cathy adorns herself for the party.

But with the easy readiness of her greater experience, Mrs. Bartlett instantly said, —

"It was so funny, my dear, to see May in that ridiculously short skirt overtopping you that I

had to laugh;" and then turning briskly to May, she treated the matter as of no consequence by saying,—

"Now, May, if you will come with me to the sewing-room, Julie will attend to your skirt."

The two girls saw little of each other after this, until it was time to dress for the evening. It was an early party, on account of the young people, and May had been occupied with Julie most of the afternoon.

When, therefore, the two met later in the day, something of Cathy's irritation had been overlaid by other things; but it had only been overlaid, and May knew, by the rather artificial manner in which Cathy tried to be cordial and natural, that she had not forgotten. Specially was this noticeable when May donned the gown that Julie had altered.

"Oh, does n't it look nice, though?" cried Cathy, in a slightly strained and nervous tone.

"It does very well," was all that May could reply; for in fact the gown did not look particularly nice, spite of Julie's efforts. The lengthening process showed in the white surface, and even the broad sash did not conceal that the waist also had been a little outgrown. Julie, who had been sent in by Mrs. Bartlett to assist

the girls at their toilets, turned to Cathy at last, saying in her French-English, —

"Now if Mees Cathy 's ready for me, I make her ready."

Cathy still waited. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, she cried, —

"Oh, May, will you see if I can have some of that red kalmia from the greenhouse instead of the daisies?"

May took the hint, — Cathy wanted to get rid of her. It was on the stroke of the hour for which the guests had been bidden when they next met.

"What can your friend be about?" Mrs. Bartlett asked with some concern as the minutes sped by. May knew no more than her stepmother. She only knew that the bunch of kalmia had been sent up to Cathy half an hour ago.

"Perhaps you had better run up and see if she is waiting for you to come for her," Mrs. Bartlett then suggested. But just as May started, the clock struck eight, and at the same time the door-bell rang. At that very moment a white vision appeared on the parlor threshold. It was a slender young lady in a white dress, with her dark hair piled in a crown-like coil

upon the top of her head. At the neck, a cluster of scarlet flowers began, and widening out in a bright mass of color, drooped in long sprays to the waist-line. Both May and her stepmother looked at this vision at first with surprisé. Was it a guest whose arrival they had not heard? The white vision stepped forward; the red mouth above the red flowers smiled.

"Why, Cathy!" cried May. Yes, it was Cathy. In her long white dress, with her dusky hair gathered up, and all those scarlet kalmias, she looked like a young lady, and a very pretty one, it must be confessed. Cathy was quite aware of the effect that she produced. She saw surprised admiration in May's glance. It was not so easy to read Mrs. Bartlett's face, but in the smile of recognition Miss Cathy saw no sign of disapproval.

The ring at the door-bell was that of the little party from the seminary. When they came into the parlor, Joanna, as the eldest of the three, advanced first, Elsie and Susy shyly following. All three were dressed somewhat alike, in different shades of dark-blue cashmere. If, as they observed the white-robed figures before them, they might have felt a little shade of girlish regret and mortification that they too

were not so whitely clothed, the warm reception that they received from Mrs. Bartlett and May went far to reassure them. None of the party at first recognized Cathy. When they did, Susy forgot her shyness for the moment in her astonishment, and cried out in that little soft odd voice of hers, —

"Oh, it 's Cathy in a fancy costume, — how funny!"

The rest of the girls laughed, — that is, all but Cathy; and Susy, noting the vexed expression of her face, added, —

"I did n't mean by 'funny' that it was n't nice too."

The girls laughed again, Cathy joining this time. As for Mrs. Bartlett, she thought, —

"What a dear, quaint little darling it is! If only *she* had been May's visitor!"

But as the other guests began to arrive, there was little opportunity to indulge in regrets of any kind. The guests were some of them strangers to May even; they were old friends and acquaintances of Mrs. Bartlett with their young sisters, or daughters, and their brothers.

"Oh, is n't it nice to have real partners!" exclaimed Cathy, as she saw the latter enter.

Joanna, to whom she spoke, laughed, and said

she thought *she* was real enough whenever she had been Cathy's partner.

"Oh, but you know what I mean, — *gentlemen* partners," pettishly responded Cathy; and Joanna had responded to this, —

"*I* call them boys."

Two violins, a harp, and a cornet, in a small room leading out of the parlors, made music for the dancers. All the girls entered into the dancing with great zest, Cathy more than the rest. When May had first recognized her, in the long dress and piled-up hair, she had felt such a thrill of admiration that all her old belief and regard, which had been sorely shaken within the last few days, revived. In fact, Cathy looked so much like a splendid grown-up young lady then, that to criticise her seemed an impertinence; and introducing this splendid young lady to one and another, May had a feeling of pride in her; and when she saw with what a self-possessed air these introductions were received, she was sure that there was not one of those Boston girls who had nicer manners.

The dancing was in the long wide hall, as well as in the parlors. Cathy seemed to prefer the hall, and May found herself in the parlor, separated from her as the evening went on; and

now and then she would wonder whether Cathy was having a good time. May herself was having a delightful time. She had forgotten all about her dress being short in the waist, and showing where it had been let down; she had forgotten everything that was disagreeable, indeed, when she suddenly became conscious that the music was greatly accelerated in speed, and that over and above the music there seemed to be a good deal of noise, — the sound of voices and laughter.

She was vaguely wondering what it meant, when she heard one of the boy strangers from town say to another, with a laugh, —

"They 're rushing things out there in the hall, are n't they?" And the other answered, —

"It 's that seminary girl. She 's set them all a-going. I saw her speak to the musicians just now."

That seminary girl! Who, *who* could they mean? Just then the final quadrille change was called, and the moment she was free, May dashed out into the hall. But the music, which had ceased for a second, had struck up again into a wild jig tune; and there was Cathy, her hair flying, her laugh sounding, leading off down the polished floor, almost on a run, to

the jig tune, with one of the older boys for her partner.

"Margaret, if you don't stop that little hoyden, I will!" May here overheard her father say. The next instant she saw her stepmother walk rapidly past, and in another instant the music came to an abrupt close.

Cathy, in her mad speed, at that instant met Mrs. Bartlett face to face as she was leaving the music-room.

"Oh, Mrs. Bartlett," she broke forth, "how *could* you stop our fun?"

"Hush, my dear," began Mrs. Bartlett; but Cathy, wild with her fun, as she called it, interrupted with a pleading and protesting, — pleading for "just one more swing," and protesting generally in a foolish, flippant little manner, full of vanity and silliness, with a notion that she was behaving in a very young-ladyish style, and attracting the admiration of everybody about her, when she was attracting, instead, that very unenviable attention which expresses itself in astonished stares and questions of: "Who is that little hoyden?" If she had turned, as she stood there protesting, she would have seen the master of the house approaching with an ominous frown upon his face; but she did not turn,

and she only saw the mistress of the house shake her head at some one, and then heard her say, —

"Come, Cathy, it is nearly supper-time, and I want you to go upstairs and let Julie put your hair and dress in order." As Mrs. Bartlett said this, she fixed her eyes upon Cathy with a perfectly kind but a compelling gaze, and the girl knew that she must obey ; but there was in her heart a blind, unreasoning fury as she did so.

May, full of shame and disappointment, shrank back into the shadow of the portière near her father, but unseen by him. It was then she heard her stepmother say, —

"No, Edward, I could n't let you speak to her. You must remember she is only a child, — a wilful, spoiled child, — and her head is a little turned by her high spirits, and her prettiness, and the effect she seemed to produce."

"Margaret, you would find excuses for anybody."

"I would certainly find excuses for such a mere child as this."

They moved away together, but May still remained behind the portière, thinking, thinking, thinking. This was the third time her stepmother had shielded Cathy, — Cathy, who from

the start had been against her, had said hard things, had had hard thoughts of her, had done her best to injure her. But who had encouraged Cathy? Again this question confronted May.

"May, is it you, my dear?"

Somebody was pushing the portière aside. It was her stepmother.

"Oh, it *is* you. Will you run up, my dear, and see if Cathy is ready to come down. I can't think what keeps her so long. It could n't have taken Julie more than five minutes to put her dress in order."

As May sped on her errand her thoughts sped with her, tormenting her with fears and regrets. At the door of her room she paused a moment, with the fears increasing, for there was a confusion of voices, Cathy's rising above the others.

"No; I shall *not* go down again! — to be sent away like a baby — do you think — "

"Oh, Cathy! Cathy! you *must* come down; I 've been sent for you," cried May, as she entered the room.

"I shall *not!*"

"How silly you are, Cathy! Of course you 'll go down."

It was Joanna who spoke. As May crossed

the threshold she saw that Joanna and Susy were both standing by the dressing-table.

"There 's no 'of course' about it," Cathy retorted sharply, "and you may call me silly if you like, Joanna Macy, but I should just like to ask you how you would feel to be treated like a baby, — sent off to have your hair brushed and your face washed, right in the middle of a dance!"

"Hair brushed and face washed! How you do go on, Cathy! But it was n't in the middle of a dance. The cotillon had ended, and it was you who started that other thing; I saw you, and I should have thought Mrs. Bartlett would have been disgusted. It was horrid of you, a school-girl like you, to be so forward. I was so ashamed I did n't know what to do."

"A school-girl like me! I 'm fifteen, Joanna Macy."

"What 's fifteen? We are all nothing but a pack of school-girls, anyway."

"And to be stopped like that, and sent off, and your partner — a young gentleman — standing with you!"

"Oh, that 's it! A young gentleman! That Everett boy!" and Joanna laughed scornfully.

Cathy's rage did n't cool at Joanna's speech,

and she was about to retort again, when May broke in with her entreaty, —

"Oh, *do* come, Cathy! I have been sent for you."

"Yes, *she* sent you, I suppose," with a sneering emphasis upon the pronoun.

"Cathy, you are very, very unjust. If you did but know it, she has been very kind to you," cried May.

"She! She! She!" Cathy mockingly repeated. "That is what May calls this stepmother of whom all at once she is so fond!" and then, in a few sharp, stinging words, Cathy let loose the irritation that had been accumulating from her hurt vanity for the last few days. In these words were reproach and accusation, which had enough truth in them to make it very difficult for May to control herself; but with the reproach and accusation against herself were mixed at last such comment and criticism of her stepmother as not only May, but the two other girls, felt to be both unfair and impertinent.

"How can you, Cathy?" burst out Joanna, indignantly. "Mrs. Bartlett has been lovely to you, — to us all, I 'm sure. If you had to sputter out that silly prejudice against stepmothers at first, you might stop now. I should think you 'd harmed May about enough."

"*I* harmed May! May hated her stepmother from the first. It was May who told me —" Her voice suddenly ceased as she caught the expression of horror in May's eyes, — May, who was looking beyond her at somebody or something, — who — what could it be?

VI.

CATHY turned, and there, between the portières that separated them from the next room, stood — Mrs. Bartlett! How much had she heard? She had heard enough. Her cheeks were scarlet; her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Silent from horror in the first moment, in the next, as she saw that look of hurt, May's heart rose up in one pitiful, pitying, appealing cry, and that cry was, —

"Oh, Mamma! Mamma!"

Mrs. Bartlett lifted her head with a quick start; she began to speak: "May, I —" then her voice broke, and the tears that had been withheld overflowed.

Just here, "Margaret, Margaret, where are you all?" Mr. Bartlett was heard calling impatiently as he approached from the other room.

Margaret dried her eyes with a swift movement, and with an entreating, "Come, girls, come with me," turned away.

Thoroughly subdued and not a little frightened, Cathy made no further attempt at delay, but followed the others as they obeyed Mrs. Bartlett's entreaty.

Going down the stairs, Susy, pressing close to Joanna, whispered softly,—

"Joanna, did you notice May called her stepmother 'Mamma,' and did you notice her stepmother's face? She cried, but there was a little smile there; did you notice, Joanna?"

Joanna squeezed Susy's hand for reply. She had noticed, but she fancied no one else had noticed.

How the party ended, May could scarcely have told you. Everything was like a bad dream after this, and she moved about mechanically in the supper-room, answering questions, now and then seeing that some one was served, but taking nothing herself; once or twice she saw her stepmother looking at her, but she could not meet the glance. Cathy took things more easily. Back again among the lights, the flowers, and the young people, her spirits returned in a measure, though with a wholesome

difference of restraint. May observed her ease with astonishment. *She* could think of nothing but that dreadful talk upstairs, especially of that last sentence which her stepmother had overheard. And how much more had been overheard?

All the instincts of a lady were beginning to work in May's mind, and to fill her with self-disgust and shame. She felt like a little traitor in her own household, — a traitor to her father, and an ungenerous enemy to her father's wife; an ungenerous enemy from the first, when she had wilfully misunderstood, and — yes, wilfully misrepresented the matter of the garden-party. Then one by one her other "grievances" came up, "grievances" that she had made much of and confided to Cathy! Oh, those confidences to Cathy! They reminded her of the old mythological story of the dragon's teeth that Cadmus blindly sowed. They had come up like armed men to destroy her.

It had been part of the arrangement, when Cathy had been permitted to spend her vacation at the Bartletts', that she should return on Saturday afternoon to the seminary, that she might be all ready for school duties upon Monday. The party had been the excuse for ex-

tending the hour of return to evening. Both Cathy and May, at the beginning of the week, had urged, but without effect, that the visit might extend to Monday morning. Now both felt a sense of relief that they were to separate that night. Cathy, as usual, was the easier of the two, as the final good-byes were said. Her glib tongue did not falter even when she faced Mrs. Bartlett, though, to her credit be it said, a deep blush suffused her cheeks as that lady came forward with a kindly courtesy the girl knew she did not deserve to receive. As for May, the hardest time of all was when the last carriage drove away and she was left alone with her father and his wife. Her father would be sure to say something about Cathy's behavior, though, thanks to her stepmother, she knew he had heard nothing of what had occurred upstairs. Perhaps, however, she could escape. It was a late hour for her, and she would say good-night in the hall and run up to bed. She was half-way up the stairway when Mr. Bartlett called out quickly, —

"May!"

She stopped suddenly, her heart beating violently, her limbs trembling. The next moment she started backward, stumbled, and — fell.

"My *dear!*" and her father sprang forward, and lifted her in his arms. She lay there quite still and very pale. "Are you hurt?" She shook her head, smiled a little, and tried to help herself. As she did so she cried out with pain, —

"Oh, my foot!" She had sprained her ankle.

"Send for Mrs. Marks, Margaret," Mr. Bartlett said, as he carried May into her chamber.

"Mrs. Marks went to bed an hour ago, Edward, with a sick headache; but if it is a sprain, I know all about a sprain, and if you will trust me" — Margaret paused an instant — "you and May," and she looked down upon May with questioning eyes.

"Of course we 'll trust you; we 're only too glad to, are n't we, Maisie?"

May gave a shy assent in a faint "yes," yet there was an expression in her face that did not escape Mrs. Bartlett's eyes. It was an expression of dread mixed with shame. But ignoring all this, she set about her work of relief in a pleasant, easy manner, sending Julie for hot water and bandages, then softly manipulating the sprained ankle, with a touch both sure and skilful. There was something in this touch, deli-

cate and firm, that brought up to May, by sheer force of contrast, Mrs. Marks's heavy-handed care. The light movement, too, the soft-voiced orders, the ease of everything, — all were so different from Mrs. Marks's bustling ways, her step that shook the room, her incessant talk of pity and question and anxiety, whenever an accident put any one under her ministrations.

By degrees May lost something of that conscious feeling of dread and shame as she lay there. Even when Julie left the room for the night, and May found herself quite alone with her stepmother, the dread did not return, and the keen feeling of shame was softened by a sense of sorrow and humility for all that she had thought and said. It was just when this feeling was strong within her that her stepmother, turning down the light, approached the bed with the words, —

"There, my dear, I have put this stand beside you, with a bell upon it, and if you need me, you have only to ring, and I shall hear you and come to you. You say your ankle does not pain you very much now?"

"Not nearly as much, — just a little."

"Well, I shall be in the next room to you, and can come to you in a moment if you need anything."

"In the next room?" May inquired with surprise.

"Yes, I shall sleep on the lounge there to-night to be near you."

May looked up quickly, and gave a little exclamatory "Oh!"

"What is it, my dear?" asked Mrs. Bartlett, bending over her.

"Nothing," very faintly.

It was then, with a final adjustment of the bed-clothing, that her stepmother, turning to go, said gently, —

"Good-night, my dear;" and May, closing her eyes, answered almost in a whisper, —

"Good-night — Mamma."

In the next instant she felt the touch of soft, warm lips upon her forehead. She could not speak. She lay quite still. When she opened her eyes, she was alone.

On Monday morning word was sent to the seminary that Miss Bartlett had sprained her ankle and would not be able to attend school for a fortnight at least.

Of course Cathy would be the first to go and see May, thought the girls. But Cathy seemed to be in no haste to go. She even excused herself by saying that she was not well, when

Professor Ingalls proposed that she should take a message for him to Mrs. Bartlett. And so it came about that Joanna and Susy were May's first callers. It was Mrs. Bartlett who received the visitors, and who went up to announce them to May. It happened that she did not mention their names as she went into the chamber, that she only said, —

"Well, my dear, two of your school friends have come to cheer you up."

"Oh, I can't — I can't see Cathy — just now," May cried excitedly.

"But it is n't Cathy; it is Joanna, and that quaint little girl —I forget her name," Mrs. Bartlett answered quietly.

"Oh, Susy!" And when Joanna and Susy went into the room the happy relief in May's heart shone in her face, and gave her greeting an added warmth.

By and by the girls fell to talking of the party, of the "good time" they had had, and by and by in this talk, that last half-hour — that bad time that had so spoiled the "good" — was brought up, and Joanna exclaimed vehemently, —

"I think that Cathy Bond would spoil anything. She 's what Professor Ingalls would call

'demoralizing.' She — she tried from the first to — to —"

Joanna colored a little and stopped.

May took up her words — "to set me against my stepmother. I know what you were going to say, but — Joanna — I — I let Cathy talk — I made her talk by telling her things. My Cousin Jack said last summer that boys, if they *were* rougher than girls, would be ashamed to do some of the sneaking things that girls do sometimes, — the things that were unfair and like little lies. I was awfully vexed when he said it, but now I think he was just right."

"Oh, no, May," interrupted Joanna, soothingly.

"Yes, I do; I know he was right." Then, with a catch in her breath, May went on and confessed herself, — told of her unfair way of looking at things and of representing them; of the garden-party, the village wagon, and other "little lies" as she now called them.

"But you believed you were right then," still soothingly consoled Joanna.

"I read the other day in a book that people — some people — lie to themselves and believe it!" Susy suddenly broke forth in her queerest way.

"Oh, Susy!" cried Joanna, looking at May;

but May's lips were drawing up from their sad lines, and as she caught Joanna's eye she laughed, Joanna following in a half-suppressed giggle.

"But what I can't get over," began May again, "is that — that last thing that Cathy said upstairs here, that — Mamma overheard." As May said this, as she pronounced the word "Mamma," she colored scarlet.

"You called her 'Mamma' right there that night, and, May, she knew how sorry you were then, for I saw her smile quick and soft, and I told Joanna about it, did n't I, Joanna?"

"Oh, but, Susy, that was the least I could do. I *had* to say it. It burst out."

"Why don't you say some more — let some more — what you have told us — 'burst out' to *her?*" quaintly asked Susy.

"Oh, I don't know how. I feel so mean when I think of things."

"You would n't feel so mean afterward, and, May, you do like her now, don't you; that is, you *don't hate* her now, the least bit, do you?"

Susy did say such things! Joanna turned cold as she listened. But May answered as if she was relieved to speak, —

"I don't think I ever hated *her;* it was the stepmother."

There was a little pause; then Joanna said, —

"I think she was lovely, — just lovely to Cathy at the party. I was dancing in the hall, and I saw and heard everything."

May thought how in the same way she had been lovely to Cathy through the whole week.

As she thought this, Susy started up from one of her small reveries and said brightly, —

"Oh, I've been thinking how I wish she would like *me*. I think it would be perfectly beautiful; she's so sweet and sort of far off and up above us, like an elder sister."

Joanna laughed merrily at Susy's sudden outburst, but to May the words came more seriously. She was startled and thrilled by them.

"Sweet and sort of far off and up above us." It was n't a question of one's liking *her*, with Susy. It was who and what *she* would like. All at once May knew that it was this that was of consequence to her now, — this regard of her stepmother. She looked back and saw her from the first, with that air of fine courtesy that had never wavered; then, through the last week, not only courteous but generously kind. Of course she would still go on just the same, —

that was her way, — having kindness and consideration for people who did not deserve it; but to have her liking, her loving, — that was quite another thing.

May was silent so long that Joanna felt that she was tired, and that it was time for the visit to end.

Going down the stairs, the two girls were met by Mrs. Bartlett.

"What, going so soon?" she said. "Can't you stay longer?" But when Joanna explained why they went, she did not urge them to remain.

Left to herself, May's thoughts returned to the miserable events of the past weeks, the mistakes of the past month. If she could talk with her stepmother as she had talked to the girls, — as Susy had recommended! But how could she? "Far off and up above us." Susy's words haunted her. No, she could never talk to her as she had talked to the girls. Her stepmother had been kind to her; she had kissed her; but that was because she meant to do her duty. Over and over poor May pondered these perplexities. Tired and spent at last, she covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears. So absorbed was she by her miseries,

that she did not hear the door open, nor the fall of a light footstep. She heard nothing until a voice close to her — her stepmother's voice — said gently, —

"My dear, what is it? Are you so tired?"

She shook her head; she was past speaking just then. Standing beside her, Mrs. Bartlett stroked the tumbled hair with soft quiet touches, and spoke not a word. By and by, under these soothing strokes, the sobs grew less, and presently ceased altogether. Then smilingly, but with an apologetic tone, Mrs. Bartlett said, —

"I 'm afraid I have n't taken very good care of you, my dear, to let you get so tired."

"It was n't that I was tired, I — I — got to thinking after Joanna and Susy went away."

"And I thought Joanna and Susy would cheer you."

"Mamma!" The color rushed into May's cheeks as she said this.

"Yes, my dear."

"I — I want to tell you something. It was n't true what Cathy said — that night. I did n't — I never hated — *you*."

"I never thought you did. I think I understand. It was — *the stepmother*, and I see now

how you were encouraged by that hot-headed, foolish Cathy. My dear, I — "

"No — no. I — I encouraged Cathy to begin with. You must n't think it was all Cathy's fault." Then, with a swift rush of words, gathering up her courage with the desperate determination that had come to her, May poured forth her confessions. All her little prejudices, her wilful injustices, were told unsparingly, and at the end, with a little shivering sigh that was half a gasp, she burst out, —

"But I never said what Cathy — thought I did, — never, never!"

"My dear!"

For the first time since she had fairly started on her story May looked up and met her stepmother's eyes. They were full of tears, but the lips were struggling to smile, to speak. The girl was startled at these signs of pain. Had she said too much in this confession? Something of this doubt found utterance. Then the smile gained over the tears.

"Too much? My dear, you have done the best thing in the world for both of us. Now we can understand each other. Oh, you poor lonely little girl, — to think of all these weeks that you have suffered so! It makes my heart ache."

"Now we can understand each other."

May heard these words with bewilderment.

"I thought I was acting for the best when I let things take their course, and waited. I thought you would resent my going forward, and all this time I was leaving you to such influence — no, I am not going to blame Cathy, altogether, but I ought to have gone forward to you at once. I could have trusted the girl who has been brave enough to tell the truth as you have. You would have done me justice, I am sure. But now we are to be friends — you are not going — to hate — even the stepmother?"

She smiled and put out her hand, as she said this, taking May's cold little fingers in hers. "No, not even the stepmother, my dear," smiling now a little archly. "You have something to forgive her, perhaps, for coming to you with so little warning. But I had not intended to — to come so soon. It was an accident. My old guardian with whom I had lived since I was a child, was failing in health, and wished to break up his household and go abroad; but he made it a point that I must be married before he went. He was very fond of your father and had great trust in him, and he wanted to transfer the care of my property, as well as of myself, to his hands at once. I had not intended to

make this change for six months at least; but when your father joined with my guardian in urging it, I yielded, and was guided by him, as we are all guided by those we love and trust. Your father would have told you all this, no doubt, if you had been a little older, but girls seem even younger than they are, to fathers, you know; and fathers,—I suppose fathers seem very old to young daughters like you, May,—too old to have any right to begin again a home-life with somebody else. But your father is not an old man; he is what is called 'in the prime of life,' and probably has many years before him; and, May, your dear mother, when she knew that she must leave you both, said to him: 'Don't live alone long. Find somebody whom you can love and who will love you and be good to May.' And, my dear, I love him very much, and I want to 'be good to May,' and love her too, if she will let me."

May looked up into the kind eyes without a word, but her fingers closed with a warm pressure about the hand that held hers, and Mrs. Bartlett felt quite content with such an answer.

On the last day of June of this same year, the Bartlett grounds were gay with tents and arches and all the rest of the pretty arrangements that

go to make up a garden-party especially when the garden-party is also a birthday-party.

"Oh, look! isn't it perfectly beautiful?" cried Susy Morris to Joanna, as the two went in under the gateway arch. "Just look, Joanna, there is her name, 'May,' and underneath, 'fifteen,' — made of rosebuds."

But if the girls were delighted with this rosebud spelling of May's name and age, how must they have felt when a few steps farther on they found themselves under a flowery tent where stood May and Mrs. Bartlett, distributing to each guest, as they welcomed each, a little nosegay of rosebuds tied with ribbon? It was a perfect day, — all blue sky and sunshine and soft breezes, and everywhere the scent of roses; for the Bartlett gardens and hothouses were noted for their beautiful roses. The guests began to arrive at three o'clock; the party was to be from that hour until seven. The first to arrive were the seminary class, — Joanna and Susy, Elsie and Cathy Bond, with the dozen other girls who made up the number. Each one was in white, Cathy in a brand-new white nun's veiling, with knots of red ribbon here and there, and a bunch of red roses at her girdle. May couldn't help thinking of the scarlet

kalmia and the night that it was worn, as she greeted her. Cathy herself, if she did not recall the kalmia, could not but remember that first party, and her cheeks flushed until they matched her flowers, as she stood before Mrs. Bartlett. But that lady was kindness itself. There was not a note in her voice, nor a look in her eyes that recalled anything of that past disagreeable experience.

"I hope when I am a woman I shall know how to behave just like that," said Joanna, energetically, as she and Susy strolled off down one of the garden paths, after leaving the reception tent.

"Just like what — like whom?" asked Susy, in rather a dazed way.

"Why, like Mrs. Bartlett. Did you see how nice and easy she was to Cathy, as if Cathy had always been nice to her, — how she took pains to change the pink rosebuds tied with pink ribbon, for red ones tied with red ribbon, when she saw Cathy's dress? I'm sure Cathy ought to *love* her now, and not be offish any more."

"'Offish'?" repeated Susy, still in her queer, dazed little way.

"Yes, why you *know* how she's acted ever since that night of the party. She did n't go near

May to inquire how her ankle was, until it was nearly well, and then she went with one of the teachers; and since then she has only been to the house once, — once in all these six months, — and she has had hardly anything to say to May since!"

"Well, but, Joanna, I think that 's because she 's been ashamed and sorry. I think both of them, she and May, have felt ashamed and sorry, and that made them feel queer, and keep away from each other. I — *I* think that 'way down in her heart Cathy would like to — to love Mrs. Bartlett, and to have her love her a little; for, Joanna, did you notice Cathy's new dress, and did you notice her hair? She might have had the skirt made long if she had chosen to, but she did n't; it 's at the top of her boots, like ours, and instead of piling her hair up high, as she did that night, it is braided and tied with ribbon. Now, *I* think that shows something how Cathy feels."

"Well, but, Susy, she has been so stiff with May and all the rest of us, whenever Mrs. Bartlett's name has been mentioned; and don't you remember when May came back, after she got well, and there were a lot of us in my room together one day, and one of the girls said

something about a stepmother, and May broke out and made a sort of confession of the mistakes she had made about *her* stepmother, and explained, and took back ever so many things, — don't you remember that right in the midst of her talk that Cathy stuck up that little chin of hers and marched out of the room?"

"Yes, I remember; but, Joanna, I can see how Cathy felt. She felt mortified, and that made her feel cross; and she felt, too, that May was as much to blame as she was, in — in telling her things, and so, — well, sort of asking for her pity, and encouraging her to talk. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see, you dear little peace-patcher, but, all the same, I think Cathy might have pocketed her 'cross' and just said something, — a word or two that was nice about Mrs. Bartlett, after being treated so sweetly by her."

"Cathy *did* say to me once, when we were alone, that she guessed May's stepmother was going to turn out better than we expected."

"*She* guessed May's stepmother was going to turn out better than *we* expected. Oh, Susy, that is rich! and it is just like Cathy."

"But I think that shows that she 's coming 'round all right."

"Well, maybe she is; but it 's coming *'round.* That 's just it; not standing up fair and square and saying, like May, that she 's been in the wrong. I hate roundabout things, anyway."

"Yes, but Cathy 's always been so at the head, here at school, so popular, that I suppose it was n't very easy for her to come out and *say* she had been in the wrong."

"She 'd be a good deal *more* popular if she would come out like that. There 's May; none of the girls ever liked her as they do now."

"Yes, I know, but — oh, hark, Joanna, there 's a fiddle, two fiddles, listen! They 're tuning up! We 're going to have music!"

"And dancing! That 's what it means!"

The two girls scampered toward the sound. It led them around a corner to where stood a big square tent, open at both ends, and charmingly decorated; on a little raised platform above the main flooring sat two fiddlers and a harper tuning their instruments.

"Tum ti tum, tum ti tum," sung Joanna, as the sweet scraping of a fiddle-bow started off on a bar of the "Lancers." The players smiled and dashed into a swifter movement, and Joanna, catching Susy about the waist, went dancing with her down the floor as light of heart as of

foot. By the time they had reached the length of the tent, other girls came flocking in, and the harp, joining with the fiddles, set them all in motion.

In another part of the grounds there was tennis for those who liked it, and one could hear the jubilant calls of "play," "'vantage," ringing out and mingling with the dance-music until late in the afternoon. Then came the bountiful supper, served under the trees from prettily arranged little tables, to which all the guests came flocking with hearty outdoor appetites. Long before seven o'clock, all the guests had declared that it was the very prettiest party they had ever attended, and that they had never had such a "perfectly beautiful time."

At the very last, the crowning fun for the four seminary girls came when May drove them home in the village wagon. It was a roomy wagon, but five of them — just think of it! I don't know how they ever crowded in, but they did, and Mrs. Bartlett helped them do it, laughing like a girl herself.

As May turned the pony's head, Susy exclaimed, —

"But this is n't the old pony, — old Jimmy!"

"No, this is a new one. Is n't he a beauty?

"Good-night, Mrs. Bartlett."

It 's Mamma's birthday present to me, — bought with her own money, — and — and it was she who gave me the wagon in the autumn. I did n't know it until Papa told me this morning."

There was the least little bit of a conscious pause, then they all began to talk briskly of the pony's merits, and in the middle of this talk May asked Cathy if she would n't like to drive. There was nothing that could have pleased Cathy more, and she took the pretty red reins from May with a delighted "Thank you."

Mrs. Bartlett was waiting to smile her final good-byes to them as they drove up the driveway past the piazza, and it was just then, as they went whisking by, that Cathy, with a bright red blush, kissed her hand, and called out sweetly above the others' voices, —

"Good-night, Mrs. Bartlett; I've had a lovely time."

Susy, cuddled down in the bottom of the wagon close up against Joanna, breathed a little sigh of satisfaction, and gave a little squeeze to Joanna's hand.

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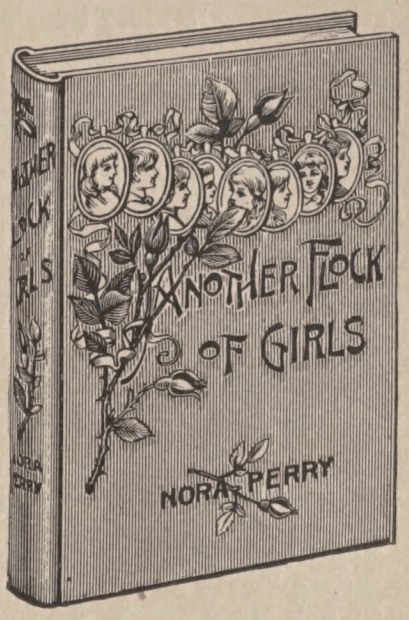

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